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INFO RUEHLB/AMEMBASSY BEIRUT 4419
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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000293

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PARIS FOR WALLER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/26/2017

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SUBJECT: SYRIAN OFFICIALS PUBLICLY DENY REGIME ROLE IN AIN
ALAQ BUS BOMBINGS

REF: USUN NEW YORK 0183

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael H. Corbin for reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (SBU) In the past week, Syrian Interior Minister Maj. Gen. Bassam Abdul Majeed rejected suggestions that the regime was involved in the February 13 Ain Alaq bus bombings in Lebanon, despite the March 13 announcement by Lebanese officials of the arrest of four Syrian members of Fatah Islam in connection with the crime. Abdul Majeed denied that Syrian intelligence had coordinated the attacks with Fatah Islam, noting that Fatah Islam leader Shaker Abssy, who is a Jordanian-born Palestinian, had spent three years in a Syrian prison with hard labor from mid-2003 to mid-2006 for links to Al-Qaeda, according to the official Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) and picked up in the March 15 issue of the official Syrian Al-Ba'ath and Al-Thawra newspapers. Abssy was released after completing his sentence in Syria, but a new warrant for his arrest was issued January 28 when detainees with suspected links to Al-Qaeda revealed that Abssy had resumed his Al-Qaeda-related activities, according to SANA. Authorities continue to search for Abssy, who remains at large, according to SANA.

¶2. (SBU) On the same day that papers carried articles about Abdul Majeed's denial, Al-Ba'ath also covered a piece by New Yorker writer Seymour Hersh about his conversation with a former British intelligence officer, suggesting that Lebanese government officials had offered weapons and money to Fatah Islam shortly after the split with its pro-Syrian parent group, Fatah al-Intifada.

¶3. (C) Comment: It is somewhat unusual for SARG officials to respond so quickly and directly to accusations against the Syrian regime. Usually responses are indirect and seek to obscure the facts about individuals linked to alleged crimes.

Abdul Majeed may have been encouraged to respond promptly, given that the Lebanese announcement about the arrests corresponded with UNIIC investigator Serge Brammertz's latest interim report to the UNSYG, who may visit Syria in April (as reported in reftel). The SARG's official response certainly reflects the depth and bitterness of its ongoing dispute with the Lebanese government, with Syria trying to downplay the extent of its influence next door. It is also possible that the Syrians are concerned about Abssy's activities, particularly in light of a growing number of comments by the SARG to foreign visitors about what appear to be genuine security concerns.

CORBIN